

A spy thriller teaches the cost of US involvement in Lebanon

By Guy Halverson

Agents of Innocence: A Spy Story, by David Ignatius. New York and London: W. W. Norton. 444 pp. \$17.95.

To its critics, and not a few of its admirers, United States foreign policy has always been quixotic - forging friendships best left unmade, ignoring, until too late, threats to global peace, abdicating global responsibilities. Call it naiveté, innocence, or just plain misjudgment, the results have often led to more problems than have been resolved, as underscored by a remarkable novel, "Agents of Innocence: A Spy Story."

Perhaps few incidents in recent US foreign policy so capture the American talent for ineptitude - hidden behind a façade of rectitudinous certainty - as the ill-fated American peacekeeping force in Lebanon in the 1980s. Why exactly were US Marines in that nation? To protect the Lebanese people? Keep the Syrians and their Soviet backers at bay? Support Israel?

BOOKS

David Ignatius, a former Wall Street Journal correspondent in the Middle East, is now an editor with the Washington Post. He has written a masterly novel that brings home to Americans the costs of the US involvement in Lebanon with all the force of a howitzer blast hitting the Mediterranean coastline.

Ignatius' tale of the deepening US involvement in Lebanon, from late 1969 down to 1984, unfolds through the story of Tom Rogers, a CIA agent in Beirut. Quintessentially American, Rogers is an Arabist driven by the best of motives. He wants to understand Lebanon and, in the process, the plight of the Palestinian people. His eagerness to get things right carries him into contact with the very centers of contemporary terrorism.

There are no real villains in this book, although the ignominious "Bombmaker," who will produce weapons of destruction for any and all parties, comes close. For the Bombmaker, there need be no targets. "The Bombmaker told us," says one young student, that having specific persons to hit "didn't matter. . . . We would only need an address" to know "where to park the car."

Ignatius gives us moments of high comedy mixed with emotional drama and very real people, although the women in the novel, with two exceptions, are kept on the sidelines. Surely Ignatius knows that Palestinian women, not to mention many of their European sisters, are in the forefront of the terrorist struggle. But with that small caveat, Ignatius has penned unforgettable characters. The novel does contain one or two pages - one involving surveillance photographs of sexual acts that suggest the irresponsibility of a Palestinian agent - that could be offensive to some readers.

Like Rogers, Yakov Levi is an intelligence agent in Beirut, only an Israeli agent. And what Levi eventually discovers ~~seems incredible~~. Could it really be that the head of the Palestinian terrorist group that killed Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics is actually on the pay-

roll of the CIA? The terrorist, Jamal Ramlawi, a top intelligence officer of Arafat, works with the CIA in part because he trusts Rogers - though not necessarily the nation that employs Rogers.

And then there is Yasser Arafat, called in this book the "Old Man," though "he is not really so old, but everyone calls him that. He is a very complicated and devious man. Perhaps a people with no country will inevitably select a leader like him, with no morals. The Old Man will say anything to anyone."

In the end, as this book shows, it is self-deceit, the worst type of seduction, that leads to betrayal and destruction. The betrayals touch almost everyone, including, ultimately, the people of Lebanon. "You come into a place like Lebanon as if you were missionaries," one Lebanese agent says in a tape recording made for an uncomprehending Washington. "And when the real trouble begins, you are gone. . . . You seduce us to work with you, but you are not strong enough to protect us. . . . We really are such fools, we Arabs. We really deserve what we get from you. That is why I cannot complain too much. It is our own fault."

"Agents of Innocence" is a grand thriller that not only insists on our attention - but, best of all, educates us in the process.

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